

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism

GORDON R. LEWIS, PHD

### I. THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE IN 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS

1

Several things may be established concerning the time of the rapture from the earlier first epistle to Thessalonica. The rapture of the saints living at the coming of the Lord will not precede the resurrection of the living dead (1 Thess. 4:15). Rather, “the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds (4:16–17). We cannot determine the times and seasons even though the signs are as evident as birth pangs. The rapture will occur suddenly, as does the birth of a child (5:3). To change the analogy, it will occur as suddenly as a thief. Many will be lulled into a false security, but believers are not to be in a sleepy or drunken stupor, but alert and sober. Thus they will not be unprepared, but full of faith, love, and hope when suddenly raptured (5:8). These characteristics are possible because the believers are not destined to wrath, but salvation. The assurance applies to divine wrath without qualification, whether in the eternal state or in the tribulation (5:9). When problems later arise, it is tribulation which is of concern. Because the rapture is explicitly in the immediate context, it is most normal to understand the deliverance from tribulation wrath by rapture.

If a posttribulationist imports into this context a theory of preservation from divine wrath by some other means during the tribulation, he ought to produce some evidence from the context for his theory. Meanwhile, the section on the rapture and the believer’s readiness for it concludes with the summation that whether we wake or sleep we shall live together with Christ, and so we may comfort one another (5:10–11). We should build one another up, for having turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, we wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come (1:10). The teaching of 1 Thessalonians, then, seems to be that before the outpouring of divine wrath on earth the church may expect to be caught up into the air to be forever with Christ.

As we move to 2 Thessalonians, it is not hard to understand why the people were concerned when told that the day of Christ was already “present” (2 Thess. 2:2). (Note, the problem is not that the day might be “at hand” for that would be consistent with Paul’s former teaching, and it is not the rendering of the more accurate translations.) They were troubled about Christ’s return in flaming fire, taking vengeance upon the ungodly unbelievers who shall suffer eternal exclusion from the presence of the Lord (1:7–9). That day of Christ’s vengeance will not come, Paul assures them, except there be first “the

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

departure," (*apostasia*) and the revealing of the man of sin (the antichrist). But as yet the restrainer prevents the consummation of lawlessness in the appearance of the antichrist (2:7). The restrainer must be removed: "And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth" (2:8).

In this passage we have this progression of thought. Before the outpouring of divine wrath will be "the departure" and then the revelation of the antichrist (2:3–4). But before the antichrist will be revealed the restrainer must be removed (2:6–12). With this understanding, then, the departure (2:4) is synonymous with the removal of the restrainer (2:7). This departure is further identified with *the* one (note the definite article) which had concerned the people since the challenge of Paul's teaching on the rapture in 1 Thessalonians, the gathering of believers to meet Christ (2:1).

The Greek usage of *departure* (*apostasia*) is not limited to apostasy from the faith, but includes departure from a given place. Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* includes an entry for the verb and two related noun forms (*aphistemi*, *apostasia*, and *dichostasia*). The contributor, Heinrich Schlier from Marburg, concludes that the New Testament usage is limited to political and religious alienation from persons. But the root verb, he writes, means " 'to remove,' either spatially, or from the context of a state or relationship, or from fellowship with a person." The verb may mean to remove spatially. There is little reason then to deny that the noun can mean such a spatial removal or departure. Since the noun is used only one other time in the New Testament of apostasy from Moses (Acts 21:21), we can hardly conclude that its Biblical meaning is necessarily determined. The verb is used fifteen times in the New Testament. Of these fifteen, only three have anything to do with a departure from the faith (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12). The word is used for departing from iniquity (2 Tim. 2:19), from ungodly men (1 Tim. 6:5), from the temple (Luke 2:37), from the body (2 Cor. 12:8), and from a person (Acts 12:10; Luke 4:13). With Dr. Allan A. MacRae we conclude: "Thus the New Testament instances make it abundantly clear that the verb means *depart*, or *go away*, in a very wide sense, and is only in certain instances specialized to the idea of a departure from the faith."<sup>1</sup>

The extension of the obvious meaning of the verb to the noun is justified not only by the common root, but by classical Greek usage. Liddel and Scott, in their authoritative lexicon of classical Greek, list as the second meaning of the noun, *departure* or *disappearance*. And they cite a commentary on Aristotle's *Meteora* where the stiffening of a material is said to be caused by *apostasia* of water from it. One could hardly find a better analogy for the rapture than evaporation. The translation of *he apostasia* in Tyndale's and Cranmer's

---

<sup>1</sup> Allan A. MacRae, "New Light on the Second Chapter of Second Thessalonians," *The Bible Today*, XLIII, 208, April, 1950.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

versions was “a departure” as in the Coverdale and Geneva Bibles. Beza translated it “departing.”<sup>2</sup> Since the lawlessness and apostasy from the faith was already begun, the translation “apostasy” would not give the Thessalonians a useful sign that the day of vengeance had not come. Only the more general meaning of departure can make verse 4 accomplish its intended purpose of comforting these disturbed people.

Having said that the rapture and the revelation of the man of sin must precede the day of vengeance, Paul goes on to assure the Thessalonians further that the rapture precedes the revelation of the antichrist. Only after the restrainer is out of the way will the antichrist be revealed (2:7–8). Who, then, is the restrainer? The interpretation of the restrainer as the church may not be universally accepted, but it fits the context with fewer difficulties than suggestions of human government, lawful governments, the Roman Empire, or the Vatican. While these have had or do have some restraining influence upon lawlessness, they need not be done away when the antichrist is revealed. Rather, he will head up some coalition of human governments in a government of his own. With or without a connection to Rome, the antichrist’s empire will extend the operation of human government, not mark its cessation.

More probable, in view of the problem disturbing the Thessalonians, is the interpretation which identifies the restrainer with the faithful church. By the power of the Holy Spirit the churches now exercise an influence of restraint upon their communities. When that influence is taken away, the lawlessness already at work throughout society will be unfettered and then the antichrist can be revealed in his time. So again Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they have been chosen to salvation and to obtain the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ (2:13–14). Assured of this on the ground of the ordered events—the rapture before the revelation of the man of sin, and the revelation of the man of sin before the terrible day of the Lord’s vengeance—they need not fear. An irenic statement of this interpretation may be found in E. Schuyler English, *Rethinking the Rapture*.

## II. THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO CHRIST’S OLIVET DISCOURSE

Another of the major eschatological passages of the New Testament remains to be considered, for it speaks of a gathering of the elect after the tribulation (Matt. 24:31). Is this an explicit statement of the posttribulational view, or does it refer to a later gathering subsequent to the rapture of the church?

The disciples pointed to the temple and Christ predicted its destruction. Then they asked for a sign of His coming and the end of the age. Their questions are in the same frame of

---

<sup>2</sup> E. Schuyler English, *Rethinking the Rapture*, p. 69 n.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

reference as in Acts 1:6: “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” In the discussion which follows there is no reference to any resurrection, nor to the church, nor to its rapture. The questions were asked in the context of Jewish concerns and Christ answered them in terms of the Jews’ future.

Following the initial signs, they would see the desolating sacrilege in the temple spoken of by Daniel the prophet. The time of Jacob’s trouble is such that if it were not shortened some of the elect Israelites might not have survived. But following that tribulation the Son of man envisioned by Daniel will come in the clouds of heaven and gather His elect from around the earth (Matt. 24:30). And Jesus promises that the Jewish race (generation) shall not pass away until all of these things having to do with its restoration take place (Matt. 24:34). The details about the rapture of the church are not in view at this stage in the progress of revelation.

Is the Jewish emphasis merely “clothing” for Matthew? Have we a different stress in the Mark and Luke accounts? Mark 13 begins with the same setting, the Temple buildings which will be destroyed. Christ’s conversation is conducted on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple: as the signs develop the disciples will be beaten in synagogues, the desolating sacrilege predicted by Daniel will take place in the temple, for the sake of the elect (Jews) the days are shortened so that when Christ comes in the clouds with power and great glory they are gathered from the four corners of the earth, and this generation (race of Jews) will not pass away until these things are fulfilled. No one can know the time, but should always be watching. The Jewish factor is not incidental to Mark any more than to Matthew. It is not expendable “clothing” of other truth. It is central to the questions asked and the contextual teaching of Christ from beginning to end.

Does Luke 21 also include this Jewish prominence? It includes all the other factors and adds the surrounding of Jerusalem by armies (Luke 21:20), and predicts that Jerusalem will be “trodden down of the Gentiles,” until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (21:24). The Jewish race will not pass away during the times of the Gentiles and will be preserved through the tribulation. So Israel is to look for the return of Christ to establish His kingdom in Jerusalem and to restore the temple. The fact that the Olivet Discourse does not mention the rapture is no argument against the rapture of the church if it is taught by evidence coming later in the progress of revelation. The fact that the discourse does not speak of the resurrection or the millenium does not render meaningless other passages on those subjects. The rapture can fit at any point in the development of the signs, so long as it is imminent. William K. Harrison argues: “If we do not find the rapture in the Olivet

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Discourse, then the reasonable inference is that it does not occur during the period covered by that discourse, and must have been earlier—a pretribulation rapture.”<sup>3</sup>

## III. THE TIME OF THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH AND PASSAGES ON IMMINENCY

According to posttribulationist George Ladd, we may not expect the rapture of the church at any moment. However, at any moment we may see the beginning of the “complex of events” to occur during the tribulation.<sup>4</sup> Within seven years of any moment the church may be raptured. But the rapture itself could not take place at any time; the events of the tribulation must first occur.

Both pretribulationists and historical posttribulationists (J. Barton Payne) hold that the rapture, rather than an action of antichrist, may occur at any moment. At any time the church may be caught up to be with its Lord. Professor Payne holds that at any time we may unknowingly be at the conclusion of the first six seals. Pretribulationists hold that before the tribulation begins at all the church is caught up. The issue on imminency is drawn, then, between those who hold that it could not take place sooner than three and one-half or seven years from any given moment. In deciding the question we must search the Scriptures.

Why did Jesus, according to Matthew 24 and 25, make such a point of being ever ready for His coming after listing many prior signs of His return, particularly the abomination of desolation? He said the day and the hour is known only to the Father. Christ said His return will be as unexpected as was Noah’s flood. We must watch, and be ready, for in such an hour as we think not the Son of man shall come (Matt. 24:44). Like the wise virgins, we must always have our lamps ready for the Bridegroom’s appearance. “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” (Matt. 25:13). Meanwhile, our talents should not be buried, but invested and employed to their highest potential so that when He comes we shall hear: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21).

If we should have a single posttribulation rapture of the tribulation martyrs, the 144,000 Jews preserved by God’s seal, and whatever remains of the church, it is difficult to understand the motivation these exhortations provide before that complex of tribulation events begins. Until the covenant of antichrist with the Jews, and the breaking of it, we are not even approaching the rapture. If, however, the “first resurrection” with its attendant rapture occurs in installments for the church, for Gentiles saved during the tribulation, for the two martyred witnesses, and for all the other tribulation martyrs after

---

<sup>3</sup> William K. Harrison, *Hope Triumphant*, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> George Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 116.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the tribulation, then one can see that these exhortations could apply to the church now, as well as to Israel during the tribulation.

So like servants expecting the return of their master, all must be ready for Christ's appearance at any time (Luke 12:35–38). A householder who knew a thief was coming would not leave his house to be broken into. You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect (Luke 12:39–40).

6

George Ladd suggests that the motivating power of such exhortations may be understood after the analogy of the anticipation of a couple engaged for three years before marriage.<sup>5</sup> The wedding need not be potentially present each day in order for the preparation and anticipation to be genuine. If other evidence supported the posttribulational view of the church, we would be forced to some view of imminence. But without that evidence, we may take Christ's commands as they are. Always, therefore, we must be prepared (to carry out Ladd's analogy) for the wedding. The bridegroom may appear at any time. Never are we given a basis for a countdown to the time of His appearance. As Professor Payne says: "The interpreter's primary task is to discover, not what he feels the apostolic writers could have said about imminency, but what the text indicates they *did* say."<sup>6</sup>

Looking then at the epistles, what do they say? Believers wait with eager longing for the redemption of the body (Rom. 8:19–25), and the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:7). It should be noted that the case for pretribulationalism does not rest upon a technical meaning for the Greek terms *parousia* (coming), *apokalypsis* (revelation), and *epiphaneia* (appearing). As long ago as 1956, in reviewing *The Blessed Hope*, by George E. Ladd, Dr. John F. Walvoord explained that "none of these words are technical words in themselves but must be invested by the context with their specific meaning."<sup>7</sup>

From heaven we await our Savior (Phil. 3:20) and His coming may be at any moment, for "The Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5). Turning from idols to serve the living and true God, we wait for His Son from heaven (1 Thess. 1:9–10). Renouncing worldliness, we live sober, upright, and godly lives, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). As Dr. Walvoord explained, the glorious "appearing" need not be limited to Christ's coming in wrath at Armageddon. The parallel passage in Paul's other epistles and the context do not support such a restricted usage. We must be patient "for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (James 5:7). And we should not grumble against our brethren for "the Judge is standing at the doors" (James 5:8).

---

<sup>5</sup> George Ladd, *ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> J. Barton Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> John F. Walvoord, "A Review of the 'Blessed Hope' by George E. Ladd," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, CXIII (October, 1956), 295.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Rather, we “keep ourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude 21).

The belief of the New Testament, then, forbids a view which enables us to know the times and seasons (Acts 1:7), and it supports a momentary readiness for confrontation with the Lord himself. This meeting is an ever-present possibility. Every day of the Christian life it is at hand. Most naturally interpreted, the New Testament teaches a rapture of the church that is imminent in the sense of an any-moment immediacy.

Can this interpretation account for the fact that when some of these statements were made time had to be allowed for the Temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed (Matt. 24:2), for John to grow old and feeble (John 21:18–19), and for the gospel to penetrate the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8)? After the destruction of Jerusalem and the death of John, these two factors could no longer qualify the possibility of a rapture at any moment. Soon the gospel had been preached throughout the then known world (Acts 17:6, 31; 19:27). We do not now stand where the first-century Christians did. But even within the first century, they saw the removal of all such complicating factors. The imminency of the Master’s return does not deny that His return may be “after a long time” (Matt. 25:19).

The only possible factors which could now delay the any-moment rapture of the church would be predicted signs yet to be fulfilled. How can the signs of Christ’s return be harmonized with an any-moment imminency? It must be remembered that “the last days” began with Christ’s first coming. “In these last days” God spoke to us in His Son (Heb. 1:2). Christ, foreordained from before the foundation of the world, was manifested in “these last times” for you (1 Pet. 1:20). Many of the signs have been apparent in some degree from the beginning of the church until now (1 John 4:1–3). As time continues the signs seem to become increasingly evident. Lawlessness pervades all of society. Since 1945 forty wars have been fought, according to a listing in *Time*, September 24, 1965. There is increasing pressure for world government, false Christs are leading many away from the faith, a uniting of world religions is increasingly supported, and Israel has been established again in Palestine.

These developments will continue into the great tribulation. Meanwhile no one can know the degree of their fulfillment required before the rapture. In many past generations the signs were sufficiently fulfilled that people anticipated the Lord’s return. Contemporary developments leave our generation with little excuse for failure to observe the fig tree putting forth its leaves. We must look up for our redemption draws nigh (Luke 21:28–31). Since Christ will come for the church before the tribulation, He may come at any moment.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

It may be at morn, when the day is awakening,  
When sunlight thro' darkness and shadow is breaking,  
That Jesus will come in the fullness of glory  
To receive from the world His own.

It may be at mid-day, it may be at twilight,  
It may be, perchance, that the blackness of midnight  
Will burst into light in the blaze of His glory,  
When Jesus receives His own.

Oh joy! oh, delight! should we go without dying,  
No sickness, no sadness, no dread and no crying,  
Caught up thro' the clouds with our Lord into glory,  
When Jesus receives His own.

O Lord Jesus, how long, how long  
Ere we shout the glad song,  
Christ returneth! Hallelujah!  
Hallelujah! Amen, Hallelujah. Amen.

—H. L. Turner

Summing up, a pretribulational rapture of the church is consistent theologically and fits all the strands of Biblical data. (1) The purposes of the tribulation included the outpouring of divine wrath on the ungodly, and of satanic wrath on Israel. The passages indicate no purpose for churches. (2) In Revelation no evidence of a rapture was found just prior to Christ's descent to Armageddon, but the first resurrection appears to be an order of resurrection involving a rapture of the church before the tribulation, a great multitude, and the two witnesses during the tribulation, and other martyrs after the tribulation. (3) The Thessalonian epistles teach deliverance from the coming day of vengeance by the rapture. The revelation of the man of sin precedes the day of wrath and the rapture precedes the revelation of antichrist. (4) Christ's Olivet Discourse does not treat the rapture of the church or the resurrection. It does deal with Israel's role in the tribulation. Nothing there would exclude an imminent rapture of the church. (5) The repeated emphasis of the whole New Testament on preparedness for meeting Christ any time of any day can most naturally be understood in terms of a pretribulational rapture of the church.

We may conclude that pretribulationalism accounts for the relevant data regarding the tribulation, the first resurrection as it appears throughout Revelation, the Thessalonian epistles, the Olivet Discourse, and the passages on imminency. In any field, the scholar accepts the view which explains the greatest amount of relevant evidence with the fewest difficulties. It is not claimed that the position here set forth has no problems. But in the



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

field of Biblical eschatology the complex data are most consistently and naturally understood in terms of a dispensational premillennialism and pretribulation rapture of the church.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, G. R. (1968). "Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 125, 216–226.